

# Retirement from the Skidmore College Faculty

Spring 2017



Faculty Meeting

April the Twenty-Eighth

Two Thousand and Seventeen

## Be It Resolved:

The faculty of Skidmore College expresses its profound appreciation and admiration for the following members of the Skidmore faculty who have this year expressed their determination to retire. The faculty further resolves that the following biographical highlights be included in the minutes of the faculty meeting of April 28, 2017, in recognition and celebration of the retirees' distinguished service and achievement.



O

ne of the first things you will notice about John Cunningham is the fierce enthusiasm in his voice when he talks about sculpture. The second is his insatiable curiosity about how things work. His joyful engagement in the creative process infuses every aspect of

his life. John joined the Skidmore faculty in 1967. An internationally recognized artist and inventor, John has led the realm of sculpture at Skidmore College for fifty years. During his career he has provided remarkable vision and leadership while he served as a teacher, scholar, mentor, inventor, and consultant.

John received a B.A. from Kenyon College in physical chemistry, as well as a B.F.A. and an M.F.A. from Yale University's School of Art and Architecture. He discovered that he was very good at math, and that scientific thought and processes came naturally to him. His engagement with art and science evolved together as he served as a technician in the Radio-Chemical Lab in the Yale Geology Department while completing his M.F.A. degree. For three years he served as assistant to kinetic sculptor George Rickey. John's intensive interaction with Rickey was fueled by a deep understanding of the theories of physics behind Rickey's work. Those three years profoundly influenced John's thinking.

John has been an excellent teacher and mentor for students. He began his work on the old campus during a very different era of interacting with students. A genuine sense of closeness developed. John's Friday afternoon studio discussions became legendary. Those early days were characterized by hard work and light-hearted fun—as evidenced by the great boat race on Braim pond, which quickly became an annual event.

A former student captured a part of the spirit of John's teaching: "In one of his courses he had a subtractive assignment, and we were asked to carve wood. He directed us to his property at the time, where we were introduced to a tree that was dying and appropriate for carving (hardwood). He proceeded to cut the tree down and chuck it up into pieces for each student. The pieces were taken back to the studio at Skidmore and, based on models in clay, he instructed the class how to use gouges, rasps, and sandpaper to produce carvings. Including myself, who grew up cutting and splitting wood for firewood, no one had ever experienced this method, from start to finish, of the subtractive method."

In more recent times, who could forget the Walk Like an Egyptian architectonic performance on Skidmore Campus in 1987?

John is a voracious draftsman. A sketchpad and trusty 2B pencil are always there, within arm's reach. Drawing is a way of thinking, of making ideas visible. Equally important is the role of the workbench, where revelations occur through the process of working: through the accumulation of parts and processes that suddenly lay bare principles that are staggeringly profound and breathtakingly simple.

Over the span of his career, John has engaged materials as diverse as Plexiglas, wood, wire, and stone. He has dealt with issues of scale from intimate objects to large outdoor sculpture, including actively pursuing the prospect of designing a colossal bridge. His sculptures have informed his scientific understanding, and he has regarded his sculpture within the interactive context of designing an entire environment including gardens, walkways, and sightlines.

His work has appeared in individual and group exhibitions in major museums and galleries throughout the United States. Along with exhibitions, he has lectured and published extensively on his sculpture and his engineering-related work inspired by his sculpture. He has published in the journal *Nature*, and he holds numerous patents on devices for vibration isolation and earthquake-resistant systems. John's present work includes writing, development and commercialization of intellectual property, and exploration of CAD and three-dimensional printing technologies.

There has been a remarkable spirit in the sculpture studio this year. On any given day, even from the doorway to the studio, you would be struck by the palpable excitement in the air. There was a hum of activity and a cluster of students gathered around JC, who was radiating nothing less than joy—the characteristic grin on his face and penetrating light in his eye, witnessing to his unwavering engagement with the great enterprise of teaching.

During a recent visit, he paused to reflect on his years at Skidmore. Standing in the space that he had enthusiastically designed decades before, he expressed the quiet satisfaction of a true creator and humbly declared it good. It had stood the test of time, had accommodated the unimagined developments of digital technology, and had enticed many generations of students with the smell of the wax, the mystery of the plaster, the tactile pleasure of clay modeling, and the bold spectacle of molten metal.

Upon arriving at the edge of the map of his career, John has flashed a mischievous grin and stepped on the gas. We wish you well on the journey ahead, dear friend.

# S

teven Lewis Millhauser, whose tragic retirement at 3:30 p.m. on April 28, 2017, deprived Skidmore College of her most gifted writer, was born at an unknown time on August 3, 1943. If a lifetime of reading Millhauser could

conceivably have taught us nothing else, it is the importance of a great first sentence. Thus, this introductory sentence is an appropriation of the opening line of Steven Millhauser's finest novel, *Edwin Mullhouse: The Life and Death of an American Writer*. For what words, other than those crafted by Steven himself (with some repurposing), can best capture, on this momentous occasion, his extraordinary imagination and all that it has meant to us? Like the Millhauserian cat that needs the mouse, we have always needed him, and now—like many of Steven's most intriguing characters—he is vanishing from our midst, ducking out by the trap door, taking Professor Plum's secret passage between the Lounge and the Conservatory, drinking the magic potion into disappearance.

We are indeed fortunate to have had him among us all these years (29, to be exact). For, while his writings have traveled—his work has been published and translated in 21 countries, from Croatia to Brazil to Russia, France, and Iran—he has stayed here. Many times, other institutions have tried to tempt him away; prizes have been grand and recognitions have been numerous. Honored by the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters in 1987, Steven received the Lannan Literary Award for Fiction in 1994. Following, among others, were the Story Prize for *We Others: New and Selected Stories*, in 2012, and most notably the Pulitzer, in 1997, for *Martin Dressler*—the work *The Nation* called “a story of genius and obsession.” Steven's tale “Eisenheim the Illusionist” became a 2006 film *The Illusionist*, effulgent with the elusively charismatic Edward Norton and the glamorous “It Girl” Jessica Biel. Actors such as Billy Campbell and Alec Baldwin—on his way to a luminous career as Trump impersonator extraordinaire—have read selected shorts for NPR from Steven's corpus, which is voluminous, with 13 books (11 reissued in paperback) and 54 stories and novellas.

But should you think Steven's incandescence is merely of the Hollywood variety, you should know that legion are the fellow writers who have reserved him a spot on Parnassus, to join the likes of Kafka, Poe, Nabokov, Calvino, and Hawthorne. Steven's stories are routinely anthologized in collections such as *Best of McSweeney's*; he is a sure bet for *Best American Short Stories* from year to year, and the *New York Times Book Review* included *Dangerous Laughter* on its list of “10 Best Books of 2008.” He's a regular contributor to *The New Yorker*, his stories the first place many readers go after the cartoon caption contest. In his

own lifetime, he's become a collector's item: Indiana University has already purchased his papers, with the building of the Steven Millhauser archive under way. He shows up in people's dissertations, even when those dissertations are on Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*; in 2014, a university press published a monograph with the dubious over-promise of a title—*Understanding Steven Millhauser*.

We are the fortunate ones who have had both time and proximity in which to have understood Steven. Having completed his B.A. in English Literature at Columbia College and doctoral studies at Brown University, Steven Millhauser came to us at Skidmore in 1988. Here, colleagues and students have long valued Steven as a lover of words, both word play and word precision—he is a cunning, inventive man with an eye drawn to the strange word, the played-with phrase, the chanced-upon rhyme. We in the English department have spent many a moment with Steven in the hallway learning such gnostic matters as the highly specialized vocabulary attendant to men's dress shirts—the placket, the epaulet, the French cuff—as Steven went in search of the name—*surely, there's a name, he cried*—for the horizontal buttonhole that appeared to his astonishment on his own new shirt's breast pocket that day. Like the short story form he champions, Steven is seemingly shy but truly sly. That slyness guides his quiet glide from office to photocopying room in Palamountain; it's there, too, as he ascends into the dark at the top of the library to a carrel of undiscoverable location. Does it exist? Does he? Or do we simply enter our own consciousness and very being when we read Millhauser?

Steven's world is the nocturne, where hope and melancholy, wonder and terror linger and brood under the moon. Lists might be the defining feature of a Millhauser design; they bespeak the restlessness of his eye, and the controlled exuberance of his mind...the syntax of yearning itself propelled by what Steven understands as the “secret of motion” (“The Little Kingdom of J. Franklin Payne”). As a writer, he casts his spell: “Come out, come out, wherever you are.” His conjured world is populated by wizards, dreamers, mannequins come to life, vanishing women, the boy who listens for his name in the night. The places he journeys to are Wonder Palaces, penny arcades, the emporium as well as the consortium, Dressler's Grand Cosmo, Whip at Pleasure Beach, laugh parlors, and—an enduring favorite—the Barnum Museum with its Hall of Mermaids. These are what Walter Benjamin has called the “dream houses of the collective.” Here, Steven explores the improbable architectures of the miniature and the gargantuan stuffed with gimcrack and gewgaw, glittering with stardust, awash with the prismatic. Kaleidoscopes, dioramas, phantatropes, haptographs, zoetropes populate his worlds because this tale-teller is drawn to optics: “Though both directions have something to be said for them, there's also the third way, which is the one I like best.

That's when you can stop for a moment, midway along the path, and turn your head in both directions....It's just for a little while, before I move on" ("The Other Town").

Like his American dreamer Martin Dressler, Steven finds that in "the other world, here in the world beyond the world, anything was possible." His magician Eisenheim insists that "stories are invented because history is inadequate to our dreams." Readers of Millhauser will recognize that his fiction takes us to impossible worlds that are nevertheless bound to the real world—one colleague calls it "a truer sense of flotation between dream and reality"; another claims that Millhauser changes "the standard coordinates on the map of consciousness." He summons the dark places, the hidden corners—especially those tucked in one of his favorite geographies, "our town." This is a dark enough place for us reared on Thornton Wilder; it grows inkier for those who have grown up in small towns yet are amazed to witness how this familiar landscape can, somehow, grow strange, even stranger when touched by Millhauser: *Our town* metamorphoses into the edge of town, the other side of town...unhinging into all its other sides and thereby plunging into the unrest that inhabits the quiet.

But childhood, for all its terrors and joys, is his most fertile geography. Like Edwin Mullhouse, who eight days old is caught wandering among the pages of *David Copperfield*, Steven is among the rare few who have continued to play. Millhauser's fictive worlds burst with the games of childhood: Monopoly boards, Tinker Toys, the Old Maid deck of cards, battles of Red Rover, badminton nets strung across backyards. Steven predicts our shared, ineluctable human fate: "Every normal child has that capacity; we have all been geniuses, you and I; but sooner or later it is beaten out of us, the glory fades, and by the age of seven most of us are nothing but wretched little adults." For Steven, the curse is to become one of the "incurious." And so he has always played; as a visionary writer, he remains connected still to boyhood, especially to boy characters lucky to have fathers who are stern but loving, and funny. His own children, Jonathan and Anna (Skidmore Class of 2013), can attest to this spiritedness; Steven is, they explain, what a father should be: generous with his time, his support, and his spirit. His fatherly love; the example of his own teacher-father, Victorianist Milton Millhauser; and his wise and encouraging teaching are all aspects of a whole. The baseball of his youth and his life's ruling passion, ping-pong, capture his fierce but loving imagination, that same mind interested in Edwin learning his letters, the blossoming of words in the boy-protagonist's life, and the careful cataloguing of Mullhouse's many gifts to his first love Rose Dorn. This is Steven Millhauser at his most moving. It is a quality of vision we have seen in few others, and critics and readers alike are right to say that *Edwin Mullhouse* is one of the few truly great American novels of childhood.

As he writes in his author's note to *We Others*, "What's seductive is mysterious and can never be known. I prefer to leave it at that." We may never guess the secret of Steven Millhauser's magic. And at what cost? Surely to our own diminishment. He has been a patient, engaged reader of his colleagues' work and an invaluable interlocutor. Students in his career's final "Advanced Projects" course this spring have little idea how close they came to the misfortune of never having studied with Steven Millhauser. Instead, they are deeply grateful for the wise generosity of his teaching. One student explains: "He conducts class in a manner that is quiet yet profoundly effective, getting right to the heart of whatever is being discussed. It is clear to me that he truly cares about his students' work, and takes an interest in it that encourages our own passions." Another says, "He is always telling us to trust ourselves as writers as we shape, rework, and bring our writing to its full potential."

Colleagues will miss Steven: for the weekday lunchtime gang's talks about finance, death, and magical realism; for the wily ping-pong opponent he is and for his invisible referee; for the moral rectitude of speaking with objectivity and civility of the Mets when his team is the Yankees; for the sound of a typewriter's *clack-clack* to those many years on the third floor before technology caught up with you; for that eye with the twinkle that kindles a sideways glance; for—as one of your colleagues described you—the celebrity who wears his fame so lightly it is almost as if it has nothing to do with him. We hope to see you, round the corner in *our town*; in Scribner's attic; at the Tang Museum, even though it has no mermaids; or perhaps most especially in a funhouse mirror. And we wish you nothing but joy.

**M**ehmet Odekun came to Skidmore as a part-time faculty member in 1982, soon after completing his graduate work at SUNY Albany, transitioning to full-time status the following year. When he joined the Skidmore faculty 35 years ago, no one could have imagined the magnitude of his impact on our students, his colleagues, and the college. Throughout his career he profoundly influenced the lives of those who have had the pleasure to know him, to work with him, and to take his classes.

Mehmet's scholarly record is expansive by every measure; He has authored or co-authored more than 30 publications, including the extraordinary *Encyclopedia of World Poverty* and a significant body of work on the impact of trade liberalization on individual welfare. Perhaps what is most impressive about his scholarship is how closely it aligns with his passion for shining a bright light on inequality and injustice. Beginning with his Ph.D. dissertation on the impact of education on the distribution of income in his

native Turkey and continuing through his most recent work on the second edition of the encyclopedia, Mehmet's work has always given voice to the fortunes of those who lack the power to advocate for themselves. His collected work secures his status as a leading scholar in this vitally important field. Closer to home, though no less significant, the recent *Classless Society* exhibit at the Tang Museum, which he co-curated with Janet Casey and Rachel Seligman, serves as an excellent and highly visible testament to his dedication to our need to see the world through the eyes of the powerless.

Mehmet is the true embodiment of the teacher-scholar model. In an age of increasing specialization, the breadth of his teaching portfolio is difficult to imagine, spanning 17 different courses on topics ranging from Islam and economics to microeconomic theory. His courses "Economics of Development" and "Economics of Income Distribution and Poverty" were among the most popular electives in the department. Students at every level are drawn to his passion for the subject matter, his expertise, and his ability to get students to see beyond simple models, guiding them to develop a genuine understanding of the influence of powerful economic actors and institutions on individuals. His students were well aware of the fact that their professor is a true expert in his field, with knowledge that is both wide and deep. One of his prior students, currently in graduate school, remarked, "I feel lucky to have been a student of such a legendary professor...I still go back to his class notes when I study." Or another, who rated his class as "efficient, effective, enlightening, engaging, and extraordinary." Many an advising appointment began with some version of the question, "what is Professor Odekon teaching next semester?"

Mehmet's generosity and concern for others—across every dimension of his life—is legendary. While this manifests itself for students in the form of countless letters of reference and time spent advising and mentoring, it extends just as much to his departmental colleagues. As one senior colleague put it, Mehmet is "the closest thing to the 'soul' of the Economics Department: his calm demeanor, dry sense of humor, wealth of experience, sound judgment, and above all his humanity and wisdom" are priceless.

That same generous spirit led Mehmet to put a full shoulder to the wheel of the work of the college. The list of committees on which he has served amounts to a near census of our governance structure. He chaired many of these committees (CAPT, FEC, the Task Force on Faculty Status, and the Task Force on Faculty Governance), providing steady leadership combined with creative problem-solving. In the larger forum of our faculty meetings, we could always be assured that when Mehmet rose to speak, he had a deep understanding of the issue at hand.

The entire Economics Department offers the heartiest of congratulations to Mehmet on his retirement. Though his wisdom, good humor, and deep sense of fairness will be dearly missed, we feel fortunate that he will remain in the area. This will not only allow us to keep track of his future adventures, but perhaps also to perhaps be the beneficiaries of his lesser known but equally impressive skills as a chef.

**A**

lifelong westerner, Pete Stake joined the Skidmore Art Department on a one-year appointment in 1986. Pete and his wife, Deborah, hooked their car behind the U-Haul that held all their earthly possessions and drove across the country to Saratoga Springs, anticipating a short stay. At the end of that year, his appointment was renewed as a three-year contract, and later he was awarded tenure. Now, thirty years later, he still struggles with his innate need for wide-open spaces, and he hasn't adjusted to the superabundance of trees in upstate New York. Nonetheless, he has established strong roots here. His cheerful outlook and deliberate, thorough approach to his work is known across campus, as are his elegant paintings. Whether meticulously reading CAPT files, lending a voice of reason to important departmental decisions, or thoughtfully advising students, Pete has been a key part of our community.

Pete received his B.F.A. degree in painting at Arizona State University at Tempe. After graduation, Pete joined the Peace Corps and served in Thailand for two years. The residents of his host country were astonished by his height. His large shoes amazed them. They were captivated by his singing voice during his renditions of "Are you going to San Francisco" when he was asked to sing for his supper. Pete was drafted into the Army directly from the Peace Corps and spent the next few years serving his country. Pete did his graduate work at California State University at Long Beach, where he earned an M.F.A. degree in painting and drawing and was given the distinction of Outstanding Graduate Student. Before accepting a position in the Art Department at Skidmore, he taught at California State University and Oberlin College.

Upon entering an exhibition of Pete's work, one is easily overcome by a rush of excitement. The brilliant color and bold light/dark contrasts quickly activate our senses. His paintings reveal the depth of his intellectual curiosity and his passionate love of color, light, and space. There is a crisp alignment, a resonance of elegant formal relationships, the austere tension of a line engaging a field of gestural color. The abstract interactions call up elemental processes—"the forces that do the forming" as the artist Paul Klee would say. Far from being distant or disconnected from nature, these paintings place us squarely at the heart of it as we witness a crucible of light, draw back a curtain of doubt, and

enter the passageway into the very wide-open spaces of the western desert. But don't get comfortable with the easy associations. If you linger, the paintings will expand beneath your gaze. Once you recognize the plumb line, there will always be polarities that require nimble consideration. Perhaps you will catch a fleeting glimpse of truth. Ultimately, you are drawn to the edge of mystery. Pete has shown work in numerous individual and group exhibitions regionally and across the country, most extensively on the west coast, and internationally at the Center for Art and Design, University of Wales Institute, Cardiff Wales.

A strong teacher, Pete is clear, thorough, and demanding. His critiques are honest. Pete's "Advanced Painting" courses transformed students' lives. He would count the interaction a success if the student considered the transformation her own accomplishment rather than the result of his guidance. Yet his guidance was clear and strong. He moved students away from the "cult of the new" and the intense urge to simply mimic what currently "looked like art." His goal was to train students to be independent thinkers, to consider philosophical ideas of timeless relevance. He patiently insisted that students stand their ground and use the creative process to develop a body of work that had substance.

In addition to his teaching, Pete provided exceptional leadership for six years as chair of the Art Department. During that time he orchestrated the reconfiguration of the department and the transition to a new curriculum. His ability to think broadly and inclusively strengthened the department. His service spanned a time of significant change. He insightfully anticipated the need for greater technological access within our building and worked to begin the process of wiring and equipping the studios in preparation for the digital revolution.

In addition, Pete redesigned the studio spaces in the drawing and painting area, more effectively utilizing the space on the third floor of the Saisselin Art Center while also creating quiet, effective teaching areas. At a time when studio departments across the country were closing their fiber art areas, Pete vigorously defended the discipline, setting the stage for the vibrant fiber arts area in the department today. The Senior Thesis Exhibition as it exists today owes a great deal to Pete's thoughtful shaping over a number of years. Ever focused on fairness and the educational mission of the department, Pete took initiative to refine the process. Throughout his career, he has done his work quietly and effectively, not hesitating to do even the most humble necessary job.

Yet Pete has left his mark on far more than our building and our curriculum. A thoughtful colleague and a generous mentor, Pete has left his legacy in us. So it is possible, reluctantly, to give him our blessing, and send him off to continue his creative process in a multitude of ways—experimenting with the chemistry of cocktails, adjusting the bitters, and opening up some sightlines on his property, to try to find the horizon.